



Episode Two - Lord of the Dance
TRANSCRIPT

Right! Hello! Has it really been that long since I last sat down in front of this microphone? Goodness that's shaming isn't it? Well I'm sure you understand that I've had many a pressing thing to have been getting on with. For instance, I've had rather a lot of PODCAST housekeeping to do - the resultant of which being that this time around, unlike my previous (and yes, still incomplete) Podcast you can now not only listen to my incoherent twitterings but you may also download a blessey form of PDF blog for all you're transcriptual entertainment. However, this internet fiddling can hardly begin to consider comparing to the insurmountable amount of work put in by myself, the rest of the orchestra, choir and the Music department in organizing the Fortismere Eastertide concert. Let me explain, recently, on the 25th March, we put on a massive concert in St John Smith's Square. Hyper-overdrive rehearsals began on the 22nd (that's the Sunday before) where we first got to rehearse with David Temple.

I feel I should probably give you some back story first. Last year, whilst the Connecting Classrooms guests from Uganda and Senegal visited the school we put on a giant concert where we played Fauré's Requiem alongside the Crouch End Festival Chorus - conducted by David Temple. It was a great success and so this year the music department decided to take on the much more ambitious and frankly impossible Mozart's Requiem. In my opinion the piece was always far too ambitious, as there are professional orchestras who may spend half a year learning to play this 40 minute piece, and we decided to tackle it in just over 13 weeks or so.

Any who, that all seemed to go as well as could be expected, with the glitz and glamour of slightly spotty and essentially uncomfortable teenagers in borrowed suits and bow ties standing, nay sitting, next to the frankly pompous (and don't worry, I include myself within this sweeping statement) and self-satisfied teens who already owned a suit, whether it was for a wedding, a funeral, a love of business or simply in an attempt to look like Doctor Who -(don't worry

though, I'll never reveal the identity of that rather sweet innocent who quite unwittingly confided in me, bad move, sunny Jim - I'm bad with secrets...).

And so this all led to my thinking about the correlation between my love of music and by involvement within the international links projects and why, for some strange reason that appears to me to be all but undecipherable, they haven't mixed so fluidly as I originally believed that they would. I am rather sure that I inherit any true love of music from my father, and we've always had this idea that we would take a musical road trip around America, now this seems like a purely international subject for me to start off any ramblings from and continue to wax lyrical about, so... let's begin.

You cannot really travel through the Appalachians in Tennessee and Kentucky for example, without wanting to sample the clog dancing, banjo-strumming, guitar picking, fiddle-scraping, bass-slapping Hillbilly music known as bluegrass. Then there is the Mississippi River, from its mouth in New Orleans where jazz, zydeco and cajun music were born, through the Delta whence came the blues and up to Memphis, Tennessee, which styles itself the birthplace of rock and roll, and thence to Chicago where house music was first heard, a city that also has its own tradition of blues, jazz, swing, funk soul and rock. A few hour's ride east will take you to Detroit, Mo'town.

If you add to this the rhinestone country music of Nashville, the gospel tradition abounding throughout the south, the Tin Pan Alley achievements of Broadway, the cowboy music, the West Coast sound and Seattle grunge, it is easy to look at a map of America and see an atlas of music. What a treat it would be for me then to take those legendary trails.

Yes...

But...

Oh dear, this is an odd but, and I really must get it right.

I cannot BEAR ...

No, that isn't right at all.

I just don't GET ...

No, that isn't it, either.

The thing is, trusted listener/reader, I have a problem with popular music. A real problem. It marks me out as an inadequate citizen of my time. I like to regard myself very much as a lover of the modern, a neophile, if you will. I like cars, computers, digital doodads, television, movies, just about anything new and shiny enthrals me. But, I ...

No, you see, I'm getting it wrong again, it isn't really to do with ancient versus modern. It's about something else, something quite other, something perhaps more profound.

Let me tell you about a moment, if you don't know it, in a most excellent film called Running on Empty. The premise essentially is that the main two characters, Arthur and Annie Pope, once blew up a napalm factory as a protest against the Vietnam war, they thought the factory was empty, but there was someone there who was mutilated in the explosion and the FBI has been on their tail ever since. River Phoenix plays their musically very gifted son, born on the run, who practises piano on a dummy keyboard, so unsettled are their lives.

So, we witness them escape one near FBI bust and they arrive in a new town with new identities, River dyes his hair and enrolls in the high school in this new town as Michael Manfield. He is destined to fall in love with the music teacher's daughter, Martha Plimpton, but that's later. We see him arrive, slightly late, at the music class. He gives Ed Crowley, who plays the teacher, his registration documents and is told to find himself a seat. Crowley continues with his lesson: he plays two pieces of music through speakers. One is classical, the other is, I think, a Madonna track. Crowley asks the class what the difference between the two is. There is the usual dumb silence you get when you ask a class of teenagers anything. Eventually one kid sticks up his hand and suggests, "one of them is good and the other is bad?" Crowley isn't having that. "A matter of opinion, surely?" River shyly puts up his hand.

"Yes, Mr Manfield?"

And this is River's answer: "You can't dance to Beethoven."

Crowley is, as am I, delighted by this.

You can't dance to Beethoven.

So there we have part of my problem. Dance music. It is not that there is classical or modern, serious or popular, the division is between music you can dance to or music you can't.

I know that much of what I am about to say is wild exaggeration, but bear with me. I want to address a terror that lurks within me, a huge beast on my back, a great maggot in my brain. You cannot expect too much rational talk from a fellow who is unburdening himself of his deepest fears.

This is not a bessay or a Podcast in which I reveal that I prefer classical to pop music. That is a) dull, b) over-familiar, c) as mad as saying that I prefer air to food: both food and air are necessary and besides they each use different pipes, so preference doesn't enter into it, and d) it isn't true anyway even if it could be, which it couldn't so there.

All that music I talked about in describing a journey around America? I love it all. Or can love it. I love country, blues, rock and roll, gospel, zydeco, jazz, swing, Tin Pan Alley, roots, bluegrass, hillbilly, mo'town. Less keen on the West Coast sound, on funk, soul, rap, hip-hop, house, R and B. Don't hate them, just don't like them quite as much. Outside America I have gone on record as to confessing a weakness for Led Zeppelin and Abba twin poles on the Euroglobe, but each as splendid in their own way as the other.

But this is not a Nick Hornby Man List in which I show off my knowledgeable, insightful eclecticism. I know a great deal less about popular music than almost all of my contemporaries. The point is that I do want you to understand how much I love, or can love, this music. It is important when I try to explain to you how much I hate, or can hate, this music.

It's all dance music. Give or take. I mean, yes, some tracks are dancier than others, some styles are dancier, but essentially they are all about tapping those toes and swinging those feet.

I hate dancing more than I can possibly explain. I hate doing it myself, which I can't anyway, but I loathe and resent the necessity to try. I hate watching other people do it. I hate the way it breaks up conversation. I hate the slovenly mixture of sexual exhibitionism, strutting contempt and repellent narcissism that it involves. I hate it when it is formless, meaningless bopping and I hate it (if anything even more) when it is formal and choreographed into genres like ballroom or schooled disco. Those cavortings are so embarrassing and dreadful as to force my hand to my mouth.

If I listen to music, I like either to do it completely alone, so that if I am taken by the desire to move my feet and body (which is inevitable with so much music) I can do it unwitnessed, or I like to

LISTEN to it, to hear the line of it, to follow the lyrics and to allow it work inside me. I do not want to use it as an exercise track for a farcical, meaningless, disgusting, brainless physical public exhibition of windmilling, gyrating and thrashing in a hot, loud room or hall. I do not want to use music as the medium for a mating or courting ritual. No one would ever select me as a sexual partner on the basis of my ability to froth, frolic and gibber in time to music anyway, and nor would I ever choose a partner by such desperate and useless criteria.

I can't dance. It may well be true that guilty feet have no rhythm, but it is also true that perfectly innocent feet can also be unable to move persuasively or happily to the beat. I can't dance and I SO do not want to. Or is it that I don't want to because I can't? No, I don't think so. I can't play football, golf, cricket to anything like a human standard and I want to desperately. Desperately. It really isn't a question of being truculent and captious about it. I really, really, really hate dancing and have not the slightest milligram of envy for those who can do it. If there is such a thing as 'being able to do' the kind of dancing people routinely engage in. Not so much an accomplishment as an affliction.

The unhappy self-consciousness of the adolescent on the dance floor at school, or in the village barn dance or local disco is too well known a standard hero of rueful dissection for me to need to describe myself in that guise in too much detail. Let me take you back to a school disco in year 7, here were boys and girls my age twisting, spinning and jumping at each other and they all seemed to know what they were doing. Had I been confined to the sick room with an asthma attack the day disco dancing was covered in the syllabus? How did they know which way to move, when to fling up a hand, when to spin, when to jump? When to look into their "partner's" eyes, when to look at the floor? There was nothing written down, did it accord to some chord change or eight bar measure that I, in my hot discomfort And pop illiteracy simply could not hear?

Yes, it was true that the girls often danced with each other, or in desultory fashion around a handbag and yes it was true that some boys were gawkier, jerkier and less convincing than others, but that didn't seem to worry them too much, they just got on with it. They had jumped in and they were being born along the current of the music. I was hanging on the bank, gazing in ... what? Envy? Disgust? Misery? Scorn? Hungry sorrow? Actually, none of those things, I just wanted to be somewhere else. If I had been offered the skill and dance charisma of I don't know, John Travolta, say ... I would have turned it down. I found, from the get go, that a dance floor was a place I never ever wanted to spend any time at all. Not so much as a second

of my life. I find it simply unbearable. Think of it as an allergy. I hate films set in such places. Have never sat through all of Saturday Night Fever, Flash Dance, Dirty Dancing or any of those. I feel ill just picturing them: the leg warmers, the tights, the stretching and leaping ... ugh.... And how people love to try and drag me to the floor. Just as I am tired of people saying to me "I'd really like to see you drunk one day, Joe" I am tired of them saying "I'd love to see you dancing your head off." Grrrrrrr.

At a pinch I would welcome that over the continued existence of endless long ballroom routines in which you have to be taught the steps of quadrilles, cotillions, gavottes, waltzes and so forth. I suppose the descendant of that ghastly form of entertainment is the vile terror known as Line Dancing, a proceeding so fatuous and horrible as to defy language. I have twice been caught with nowhere to run in one of those events. It was like being on the gymnastics mat in primary school, or in the infant Music and Movement room. The sweaty, ghastliness of it all and the silly hats and embarrassing clapping. Oh god, I've given myself hives just thinking of it.

Maybe it all springs from having to sing in Primary School Christmas assemblies the Worst Song Ever Written — Lord of the Dance. 'Dance then, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the Dance said he. I'll dance with you if you dance with me, for I am the lord of the dance said he.' And so bloody on. If ever a song were guaranteed to create a generation of atheists and non-dancers it is that one. 'I danced for the sun and I danced for the moon. I danced at night and I danced at noon.' I mean, come on. Seriously shut up. Shut so up and go so dreadfully and entirely away.

Classical music, we might as well use the term, is of course descended, like all music, from forms of dance. Even the most classical classical music has its roots there. Sarabands, gigs, minuets, galliards, pavanes, mazurkas, waltzes, polkas and reels have informed the repertoire from the very beginning. You would be hard pressed to dance to a gig from a Bach partita however, or to boogy on down to the Liebestod from Tristan and Isolde. River was right. You can't dance to Beethoven. Time signatures change and shift, there is no back beat, what dance rhythms there might be are played with in such a fashion as to discourage a tapping foot. Classical music is there to be listened to. It doesn't make it better. I really, really mean that I do not believe that it makes it better, and I despise the snobbery and ignorance that is convinced otherwise. But it does make it better suited to Joes. I can follow the line, lose myself in the music's conflict and dialectical struggles, dive into the textures, surge with the ebb and flow of climaxes and surface again, all without pumping, primping and body

popping. Again, I am aware that many of you, no matter how many times I repeat this, will think I am being all superior. So let me be absolutely clear about this. This is all a weakness, failing, problem, phobia, hang-up with me. It is something to do with physical shame, clumsiness, self-consciousness, pride in privacy, lack of co-ordination, all of which have culminated in a huge and insuperable hatred of losing physical self-control, in jumping in and joining in.

It is more or less certain, statistically, that the vast majority of you listening or reading will love dancing and will be annoyed and upset to think that I am contemptuous of your adored hopping and bopping. I am not contemptuous. I think less of no one for loving to dance. I am fully aware that, from the most polished society to the most, hem, savage, it is what humans do more than writing, ball games, praying, knitting, riding, singing even. They dance in the mornings they dance at nights, they dance in their trousers and they dance in their tights. The whole world dances. Except Joe and a few others. So do believe this. I am not in any way, not in ANY WAY scornful of those who dance, I am merely describing my allergic response. I am allergic to salt water as it happens, and this has given me a very healthy and natural distaste for it - not to mention ruined a fair few family holidays. I could describe the loathing and fear I have of the stuff, but it would in no way implicate salt water swimmers. So let it be with Terpsichore and her art. I am allergic to it, but I do not despise those who are not. I can't go so far as to say that I envy them, but scorn and derision? Absolutely not. Just don't ever look for me on the dance floor.

And so when people ask me what I think of pop music, or folk music, or rock and roll, or whatever other kind, I never quite know how to answer. I like listening to it, there is much of it lifts my spirits, which speaks to my deeps, that cleans me out, cheers me up, and flies me away. But as for going to concerts, being in rooms where it is playing, hearing it on television, at parties, in the street, having it pour from hairdressers, clothes shops and bars — well no thank you.

And if you think that means I'm an enemy of the people, an elitist, a snob, then I'm sorry I haven't explained myself properly.

Thank you for letting me leak my unlovely torment all over you. Thank you for listening/reading. Until the next time. Fare well.

Joe